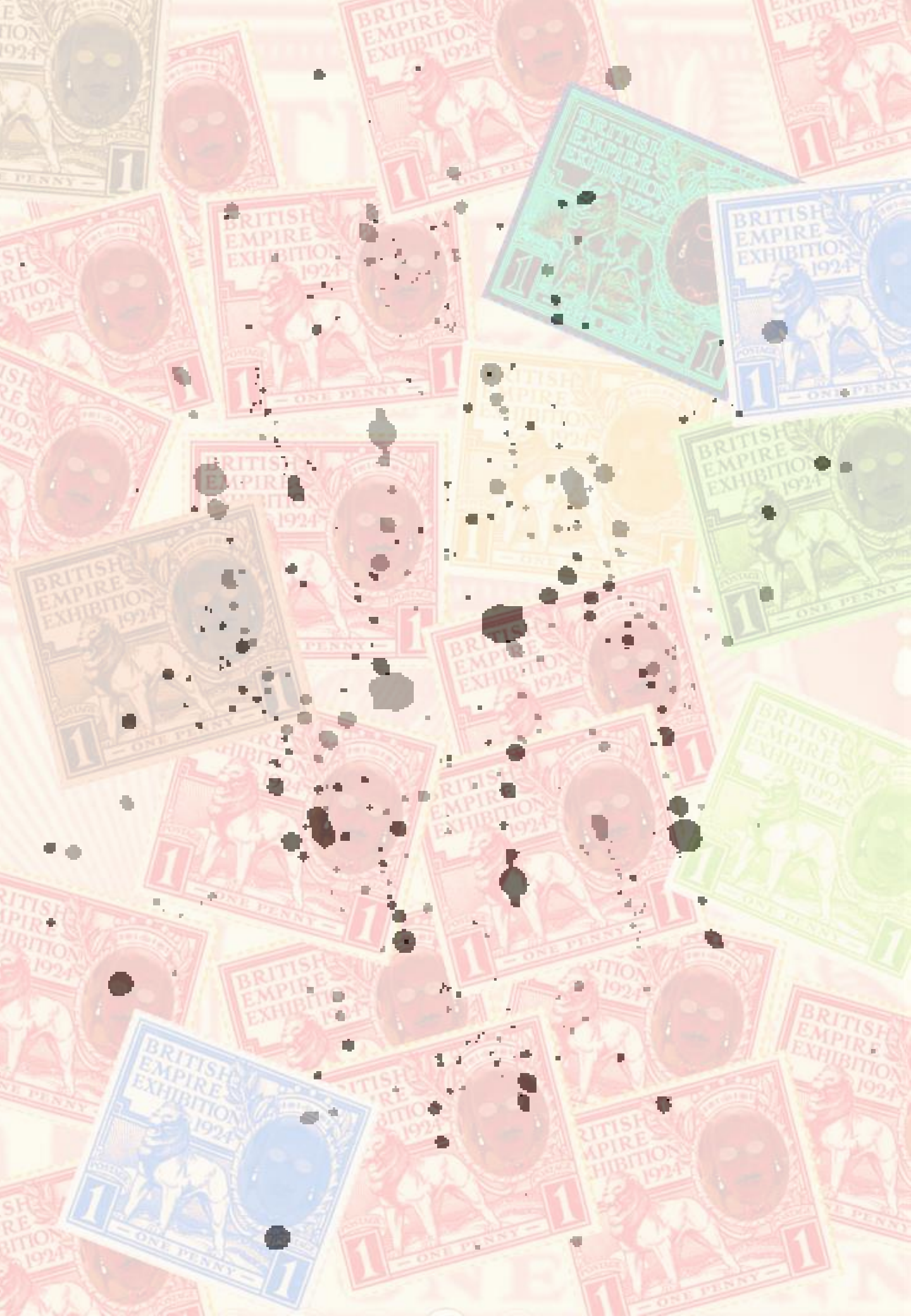




THIS IS
NOT THE
BRITISH EMPIRE
EXHIBITION

GUIDE



As part of a funded initiative by the Faculty of Arts
at the University of Bristol to enhance research

culture, Peter Baxter collaborated with Brent
Museum and Archives in the London Borough of
Brent working with participants to create zines.

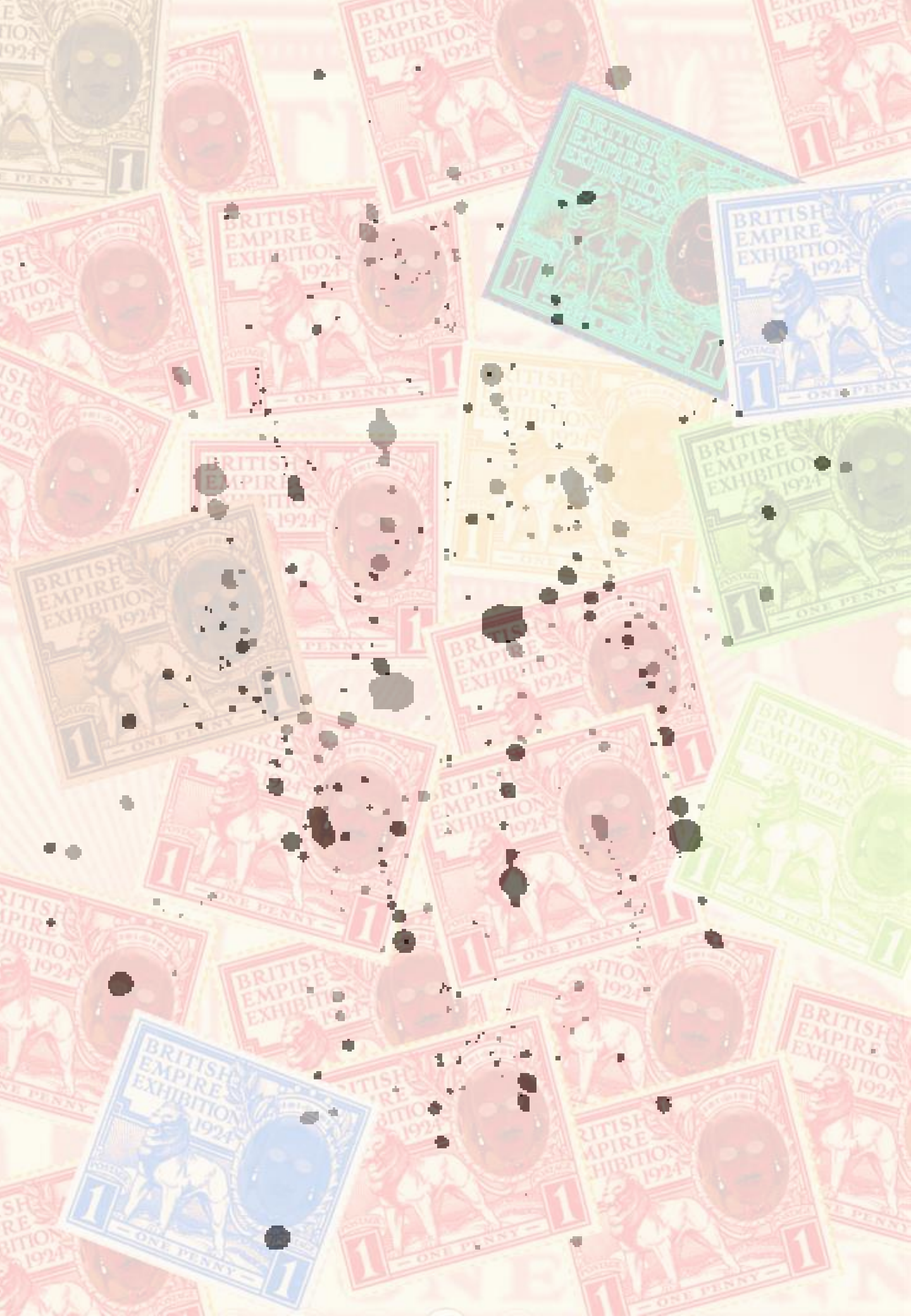
The opportunity provided valuable work
experience in the public research context,
contributing to academic and professional growth,
, and some irreverent zines.

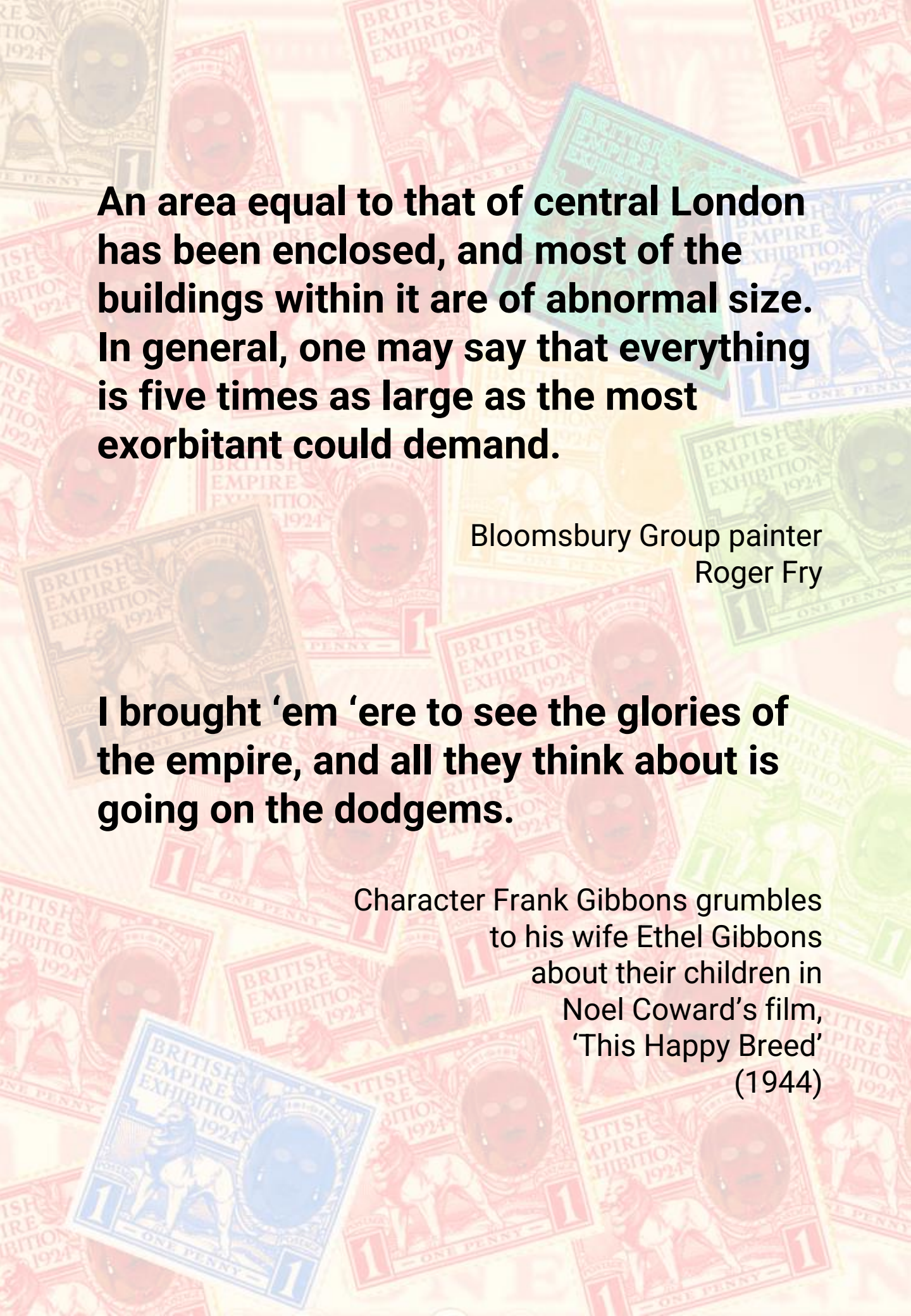
Using the anniversary moment of the British
Empire Exhibition, 1924 and 1925, Peter Baxter
conducted informal interviews with

participants unfamiliar with local history, collecting
creative responses to historical materials which
offered content for the zines.

The zines are shared through various physical and
digital platforms, and the best place to start is at

the Internet Archive.



The background of the entire image is a dense, overlapping pattern of British Empire Exhibition 1924 postage stamps. The stamps are in various colors including red, green, blue, and yellow. Each stamp features a central emblem, likely the Lion Guarding the Way, and the text 'BRITISH EMPIRE EXHIBITION 1924' and 'ONE PENNY'.

An area equal to that of central London has been enclosed, and most of the buildings within it are of abnormal size. In general, one may say that everything is five times as large as the most exorbitant could demand.

Bloomsbury Group painter
Roger Fry

I brought 'em 'ere to see the glories of the empire, and all they think about is going on the dodgems.

Character Frank Gibbons grumbles to his wife Ethel Gibbons about their children in Noel Coward's film, 'This Happy Breed' (1944)

The British Empire Exhibition 1924 and 1925 boasted displays showcasing the achievements and exploits of Britain and its colonies. Exhibited within a site sprawling Wembley Park, it included its own stadium, fairground, pavilions, and more. Some notable visitors were not easily impressed.

Included in this zine are extracts from



**Czechian playwright,
Karel Čapek (b.1890-
d.1938)**

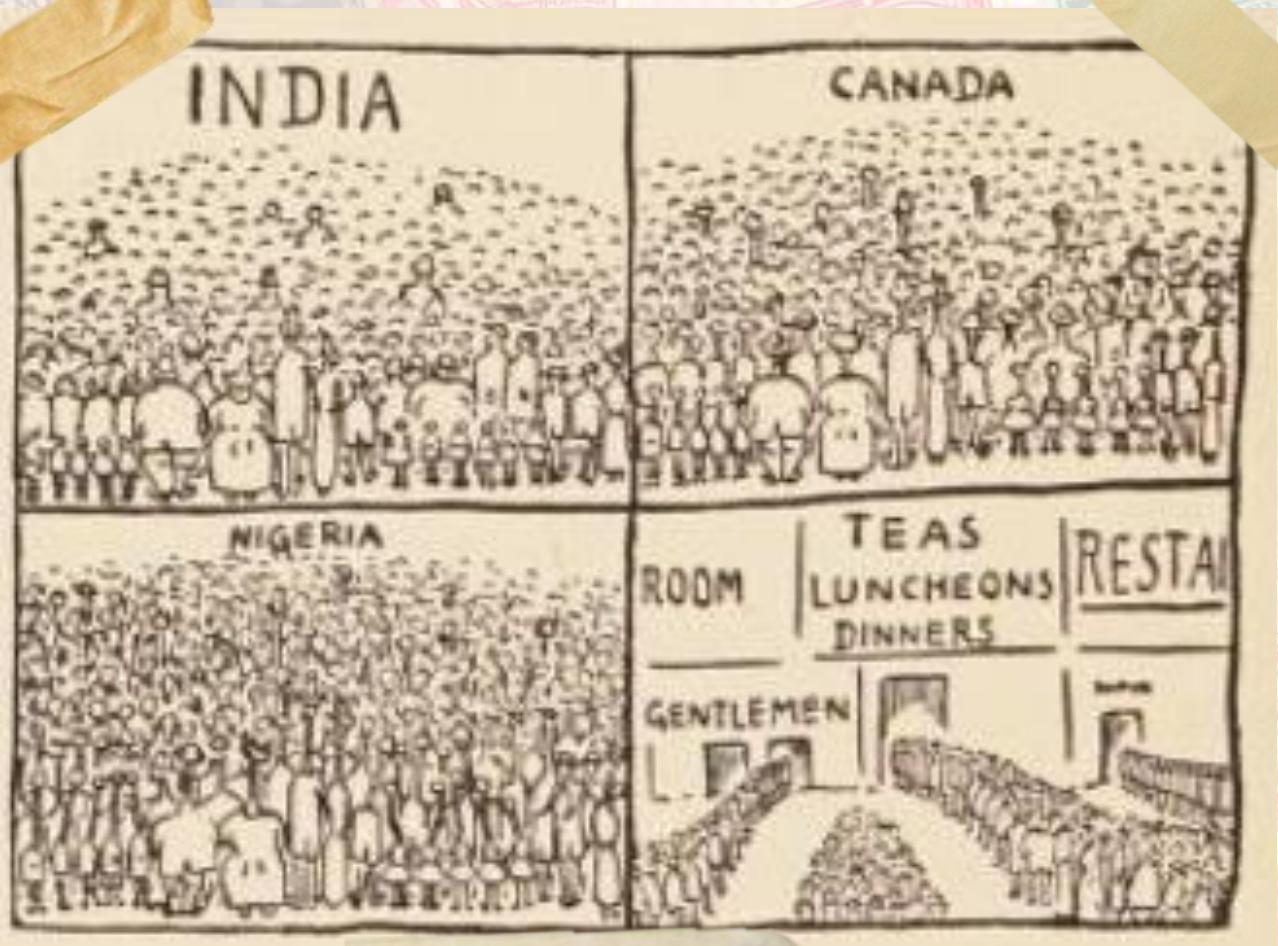
and



**English writer, Virginia
Woolf (b.1892-
d.1941).**

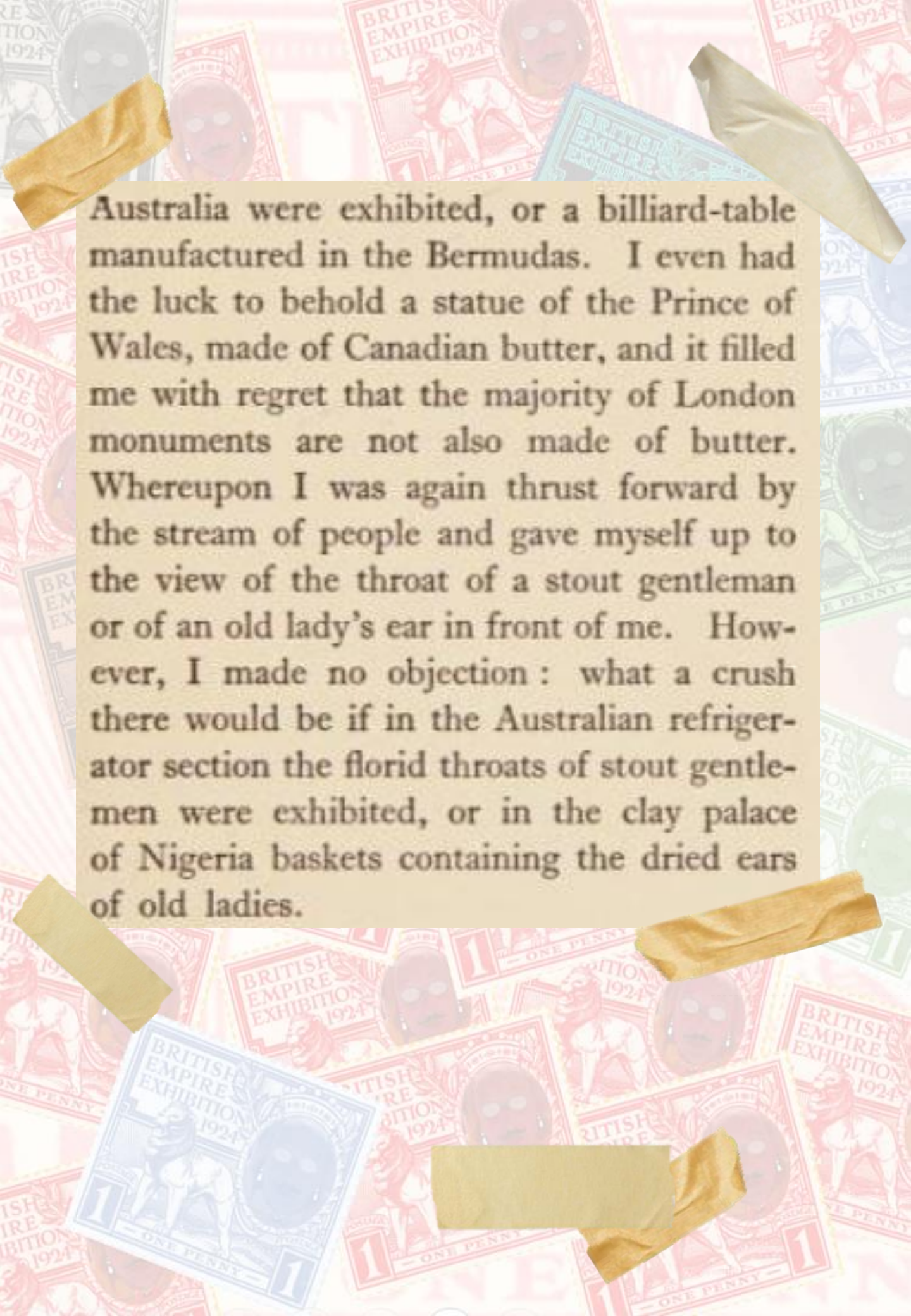
THE BIGGEST SAMPLES FAIR

Accompanied with his illustrations, Karel Čapek's 'The Biggest Samples Fair; or, The British Empire Exhibition', offers a satirical commentary on imperial exhibitions and the industrialisation of society. The text critiques the excessive commercialisation, mechanisation, and cultural imperialism inherent in such events, while also expressing a nostalgic longing for simplicity and authenticity.



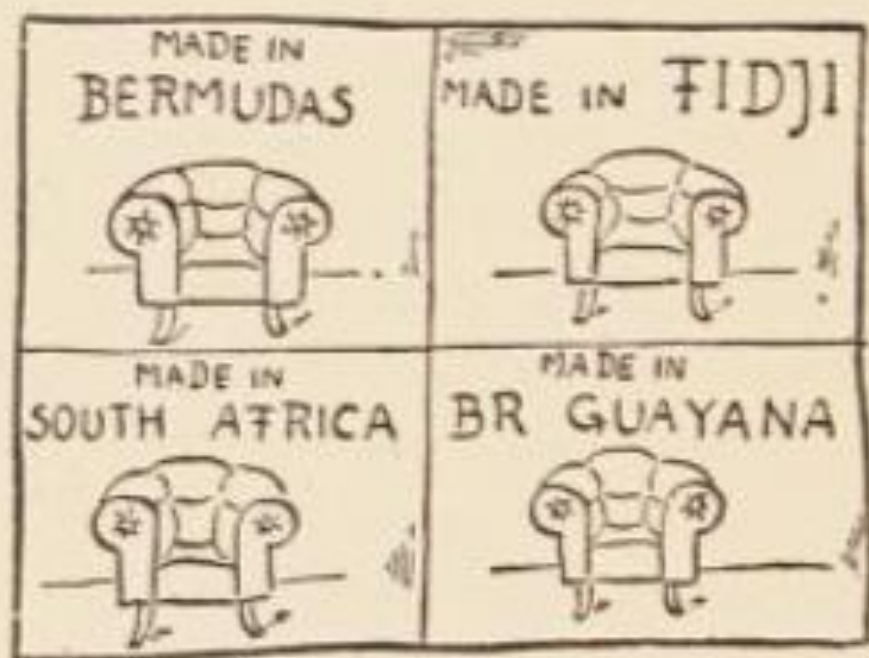
The Biggest Samples Fair ; or, The British Empire Exhibition

IF I am to tell you at the outset what there is most of at the Wembley Exhibition, then decidedly it is the people and the parties of school-children. I am all in favour of populousness, propagation, children, schools and teaching by object lesson, but I must confess that at times I should have liked to have a machine gun with me to cut my way through an agitated, pushing, rushing, trampling herd of boys with small round caps on their pates, or through a chain of girls holding hands so as not to get lost. From time to time, by dint of infinite patience, I managed to reach a stand. New Zealand apples were being sold, or rice-brooms from

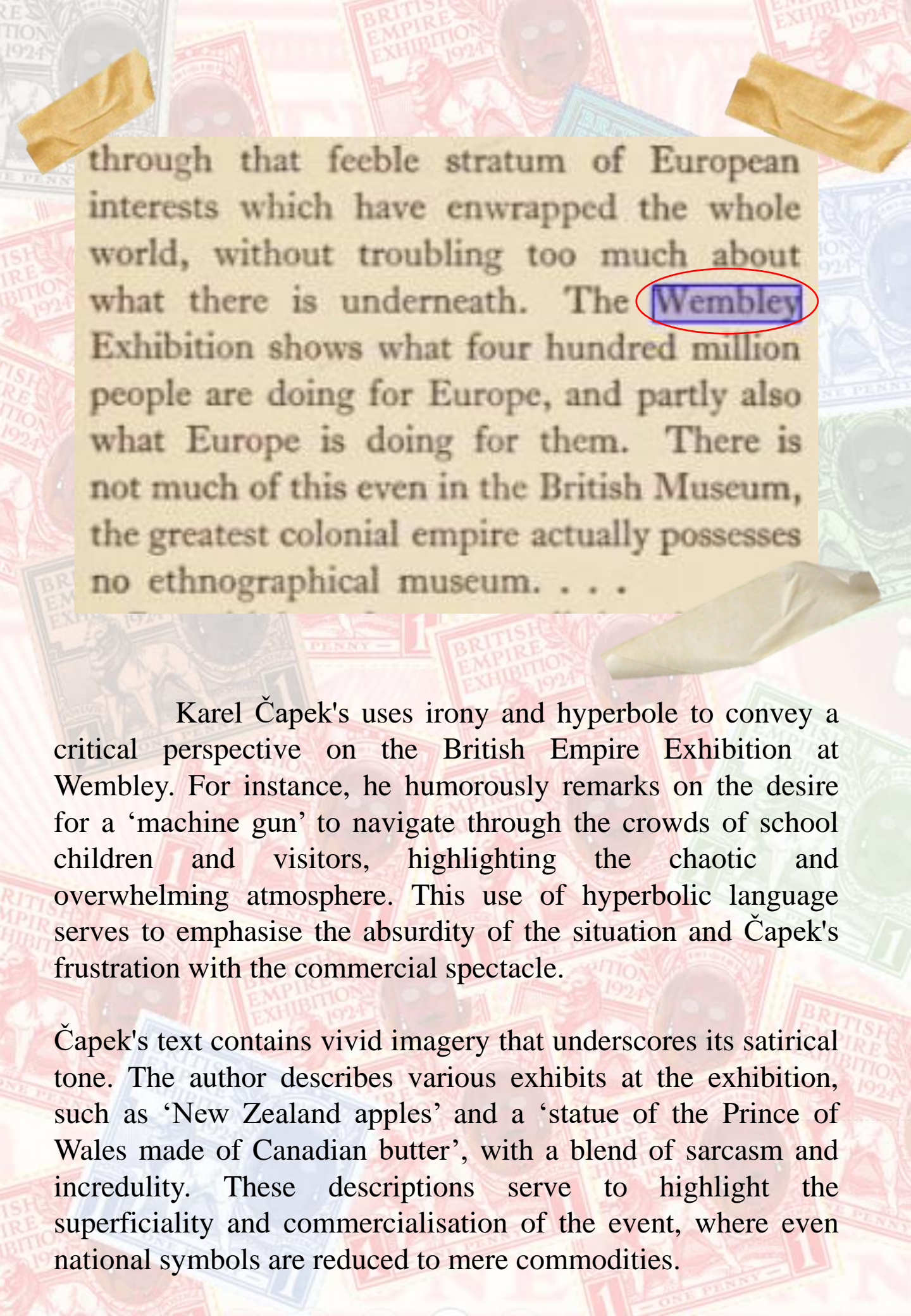


Australia were exhibited, or a billiard-table manufactured in the Bermudas. I even had the luck to behold a statue of the Prince of Wales, made of Canadian butter, and it filled me with regret that the majority of London monuments are not also made of butter. Whereupon I was again thrust forward by the stream of people and gave myself up to the view of the throat of a stout gentleman or of an old lady's ear in front of me. However, I made no objection: what a crush there would be if in the Australian refrigerator section the florid throats of stout gentlemen were exhibited, or in the clay palace of Nigeria baskets containing the dried ears of old ladies.

for curiosity and amusement. And I do not know whether this is a terrible decadence of the coloured races or the terrible silence of



the four hundred millions ; nor do I know which of these two things would be the more dreadful. The British Empire Exhibition is huge and filled to overflowing ; everything is here, including the stuffed lion and the extinct emu ; only the spirit of the four hundred million is missing. It is an exhibition of English trade. It is a cross-section



through that feeble stratum of European interests which have enwrapped the whole world, without troubling too much about what there is underneath. The **Wembley** Exhibition shows what four hundred million people are doing for Europe, and partly also what Europe is doing for them. There is not much of this even in the British Museum, the greatest colonial empire actually possesses no ethnographical museum. . . .

Karel Čapek's uses irony and hyperbole to convey a critical perspective on the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley. For instance, he humorously remarks on the desire for a 'machine gun' to navigate through the crowds of school children and visitors, highlighting the chaotic and overwhelming atmosphere. This use of hyperbolic language serves to emphasise the absurdity of the situation and Čapek's frustration with the commercial spectacle.

Čapek's text contains vivid imagery that underscores its satirical tone. The author describes various exhibits at the exhibition, such as 'New Zealand apples' and a 'statue of the Prince of Wales made of Canadian butter', with a blend of sarcasm and incredulity. These descriptions serve to highlight the superficiality and commercialisation of the event, where even national symbols are reduced to mere commodities.

Is Čapek critiquing the dehumanising aspects of modern civilisation of the 1920s, particularly the worship of machinery? He suggests that machines are revered as 'gods' while the lives they serve remain 'imperfect and mundane'. This reflects a broader commentary on the alienation and dehumanisation wrought by industrialisation and technological progress.

Čapek touches upon themes of cultural imperialism and colonial exploitation and laments the absence of indigenous representation at the exhibition, despite the vast presence across the British Empire. He questions whether this reflects a deliberate suppression of their voices.

Throughout the text, Čapek also intersperses moments of nostalgia and longing for simplicity. He evokes memories of a small-town shop and expresses a desire to escape into the fantastical worlds of literature. These passages serve as a counterpoint to the chaos and superficiality of the exhibition, highlighting Čapek's yearning for authenticity and innocence in what he views as a rapidly industrialising world.

My soul,

out of all these treasures of the world, what
would you like to buy? Nothing, nothing
whatever ; ~~I should like to be toy, and to~~

THUNDER AT WEMBLEY

Virginia Woolf offers a snooty and vivid critique of the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley, focusing primarily on the clash between nature and human endeavour, as well as the mediocrity and commercialism permeating the event. Woolf also employs a mixture of irony, satire, and poetic imagery to convey her perspective.

Woolf begins by personifying nature as the ruin of Wembley, highlighting the futility of human attempts to control it. Despite efforts to sanitise the environment, nature persists, symbolised by the presence of thrushes and the sky.

The contrast Woolf makes between Wembley and other London exhibition venues like Earls Court and the White City underscores the lack of vitality and transformation at Wembley, where everything remains stagnant and uninspired.

Woolf's criticism extends to the commercial aspects of the exhibition, particularly the overpriced and mediocre offerings at the restaurant and throughout the 216 acres. The recurring motif of 'six and eightpence' emphasises the pervasive banality and conformity which she suggests is a lack of imagination and diversity in the showcased products and experiences.

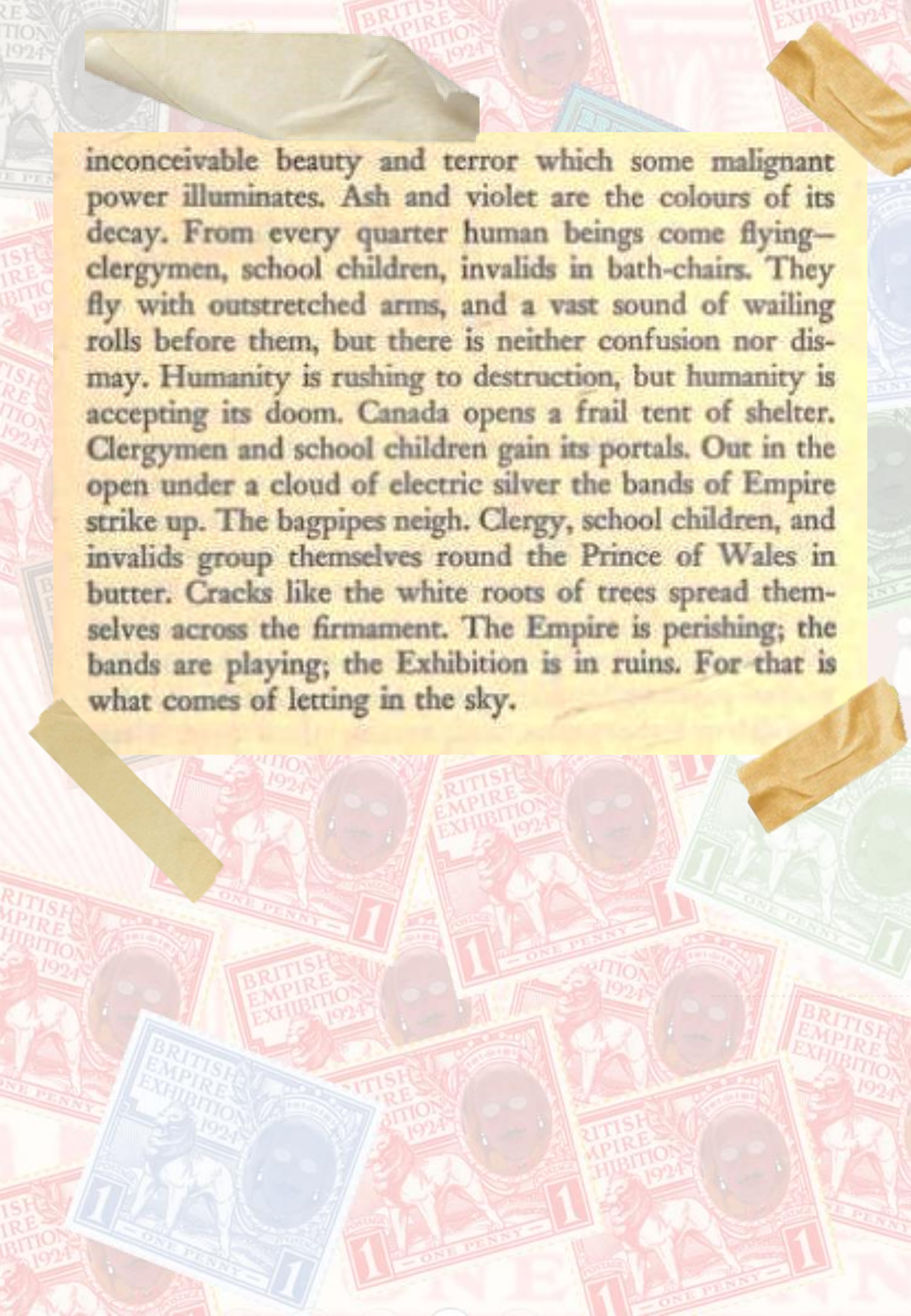
Woolf highlights the unexpected presence of ordinary people amidst the grandeur of the exhibition. These individuals, depicted with a sense of dignity and leisure, serve as a contrast to the sterile and artificial atmosphere of Wembley. Their presence disrupts the illusion of grandeur and underscores the exhibition's failure to captivate and inspire.

The climax of the critique occurs when nature, represented by the sky, asserts itself with destructive force. The chaotic scene of dust storms and impending catastrophe serves as a metaphor for the hubris of human endeavour, the demise of the British Empire, and the inevitable triumph of nature.

Despite the impending disaster, there is a sense of acceptance and resignation among the attendees, suggesting a recognition of their own insignificance in the face of natural forces.



The problem of the sky, however, remains. Is it, one wonders, lying back limp but acquiescent in a green deck-chair, part of the Exhibition? Is it lending itself with exquisite tact to show off to the best advantage snowy Palestine, ruddy Burma, sand-coloured Canada, and the minarets and pagodas of our possessions in the East? So quietly it suffers all these domes and palaces to melt into its breast; receives them with such sombre and tender discretion; so exquisitely allows the rare lamp of Jack and Jill and the Monkey-Teasers to bear themselves like stars. But even as we watch and admire what we would fain credit to the forethought of Lieutenant-General Sir Travers Clarke, a rushing sound is heard. Is it the wind, or is it the British Empire Exhibition? It is both. The wind is rising and shuffling along the avenues; the Massed Bands of Empire are assembling and marching to the Stadium. Men like pin-cushions, men like pouter pigeons, men like pillar-boxes, pass in procession. Dust swirls after them. Admirably impassive, the bands of Empire march on. Soon they will have entered the fortress; soon the gates will have clanged. But let them hasten! For either the sky has misread her directions, or some appalling catastrophe is impending. The sky is livid, lurid, sulphurine. It is in violent commotion. It is whirling water-spouts of cloud into the air; of dust in the Exhibition. Dust swirls down the avenues, hisses and hurries like erected cobras round the corners. Pagodas are dissolving in dust. Ferro-concrete is crumbling. Columns are perishing and dispersing in spray of



inconceivable beauty and terror which some malignant power illuminates. Ash and violet are the colours of its decay. From every quarter human beings come flying—clergymen, school children, invalids in bath-chairs. They fly with outstretched arms, and a vast sound of wailing rolls before them, but there is neither confusion nor dismay. Humanity is rushing to destruction, but humanity is accepting its doom. Canada opens a frail tent of shelter. Clergymen and school children gain its portals. Out in the open under a cloud of electric silver the bands of Empire strike up. The bagpipes neigh. Clergy, school children, and invalids group themselves round the Prince of Wales in butter. Cracks like the white roots of trees spread themselves across the firmament. The Empire is perishing; the bands are playing; the Exhibition is in ruins. For that is what comes of letting in the sky.

Karel Čapek and Virginia Woolf offer entertaining and insightful critiques of society's fascination with exhibitions, industrialisation, and the clash between human ambition and nature. They allow for a broader exploration of themes authors explored within the context of early 20th-century England.

Woolf's analysis complements Čapek's critique by focusing on the clash between nature and human endeavour at the British Empire Exhibition. Through poetic imagery and irony, Woolf personifies nature as the ruin of Wembley, highlighting its resilience in the face of human attempts to control it. She also criticises the commercial aspects of the exhibition, emphasising the banality and conformity of the offerings.

Together, Čapek and Woolf's serve as reminders of the importance of simplicity, authenticity, and human connection in navigating the complexities of modern society. But their use of irony, satire, and vivid imagery invites readers to reconsider their values and priorities in an increasingly commercialised and technologically driven world still relevant 100 years later.



Roger Fry's quote is from “Architecture at Wembley.” The Nation and the Athenaeum, 24 May 1924, 242–43’ quoted by Kurt Koenigsberger’s in ‘Monsters on the Verandah of Realism: Virginia Woolf’s Empire Exhibition’ – chapter 4 in, ‘The Novel and the Menagerie: Totality, Englishness, and Empire. (The Ohio State University Press, 2007)

This Happy Breed (1944) is directed by David Lean based on the 1939 play by Noël Coward.



The film is currently available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xojbg_zVnyo
The British Empire Exhibition scenes are between 15 minutes, 18 seconds and 17 minutes, 41 seconds.

Virginia Woolf's essay, ‘Thunder At Wembley’, published in 1924 following her excursion to the British Empire Exhibition in the same year. The essay is republished in ‘The Captain's Death Bed, and Other Essays’ (1950) and available for loan at: <https://archive.org/details/captainsdeathbed0000wool/s5z7>

‘Thunder At Wembley’ is read by Peter Baxter with musical noise to represent the inevitable triumph of nature can be heard at: <https://archive.org/details/thunder-at-wembley>

Karel Čapek's photograph is available at:
<https://www.nndb.com/people/951/000113612>

Virginia Woolf's photograph by Charles Beresford in 1902 is available at: <https://bfox.wordpress.com/2010/12/24/virginia-woolf/>.

Find out about the British Empire Exhibition at the Brent Museum and Archives.

